

Rêver en Français

If you want to learn to speak French don't go to France—go to Gravelbourg!

Or so say the 43 students, most of them divisions three and four teachers, who this summer took University French classes S174, S184 and S374 at Collège Mathieu in Gravelbourg.

Now in its third year, the course is turning out, in three and a half weeks, students who not only speak French but dream in French.

The secret is total immersion. From the moment students cross the threshold of Collège Mathieu, English is «out» French is «in». Most of the students live in residence, have all their meals there and enjoy their social activities together—in French.

Students converse in French at meals, in their rooms late at night and early in the morning. They spot their balls in snooker with appropriate French comments. They shout *bonne chance* in games of shuffleboard and roller skate to French music. On picnics to Lac Thompson female students keep to the true French tradition by appearing in Bikinis and conversational French crooes across the beach to superimpose on the scene a kind of mock Riviera atmosphere.

The students total immersion in French does not stop at games and outings. During the course students learn French folk songs which they enthusiastically report they will teach their students in Saskatchewan classrooms. They watch French films, put on French plays and skits which are attended by local French families of Gravelbourg. In return sous le patronage de l'A.C.F.C. locale they are entertained at an evening of song entitled *La Boîte à Chansons des Loups-Garous* in the school gym which has been converted into a gaily decorated French cafe boasting a menu of *hors d'oeuvre* listing *cretons croustillants*, *paté de foie gras*, *boules de fromage*, *fromage Canadien* and French Canadian wine.

This, of course, is the social side of the learning environment. The basis of the course is the classroom. The three classes are offered by the department of secondary education of the University of Saskatchewan, Regina campus under the direction of Dr. R. N. Anderson, professor and head of the department of secondary education, and Father Benoît Paris whose inventive minds launched the program on an experimental basis in 1966 when students taking French summer classes at Regina campus were transported to Gravelbourg and Collège Mathieu for one week. Two summer sessions are now held. In July, there are two sessions of beginners' classes in oral French and a senior class (S374) on oral French Methodology which is taught completely in French. In August a continuation of the beginners' class S174 in oral French is taught and this year 10 of the 13 students in the original class stayed over for the second session, French S184.

The course has proven so successful that the Department of Secondary Education at the University plans to continue it next year, Dr. Anderson reports.

According to Rev. Father Alain Piché, co-ordinator of the course, which is unique in Western Canada, most of the students in the advanced French course on methodology are of French Canadian background and have a fluency in French. Students in the beginning oral French classes are English speaking and most are teachers who have taught French grammar in Saskatchewan schools. This year, however, with the introduction of new oral methods for teaching French in the schools, an oral skill in the language becomes an essential for the teacher.

There are fewer than 15 students in each group. The classes must be kept small so that each student is able to get a good deal of practise in class, Father Piché explains.

Instructors at the first session were Father Paris, Professor Anita Dubé also of the department of secondary education in Regina, and Robert Cousin, a Gravelbourg high school teacher. At the second session in August, the class was instructed by Father Laurent Gélinas, a French teacher at Collège Mathieu.

In education S174 the class is designed to meet the needs of those who plan to teach oral French. French is treated as a language of communication. Students experience the « Voix et Images de France » approach to the materials and methods that they will later employ themselves as teachers. The Education S184 class provides for continuity and depth in learning French as a language of communication.

According to Father Piché the « Voix et Images » method of teaching oral French is a scientific method of teaching, with S174 using a basic fundamental vocabulary of 1,500 words, and S184 using a basic vocabulary of 3,500 words.

While learning to speak French in three and a half weeks isn't done with mirrors, the trick is the audiovisual approach to learning. Father Piché points out that in the total immersion session, the students

learn to hear and speak the language in much the same way a child learns his first words.

The texts for « Voix et Images » have no words. In fact the pages resemble comic books with drawings of situations. Students fashion their own captions which they learn by repeating those voiced on a tape which accompany the comic strips. Watching a film of « stills » which supplements the tape recorded voice and the text, students will repeat a phrase both as a group and individually as often as 25 times until it is as familiar to them as an English expression.

A knowledge of written French is not required in the method although high school French is a prerequisite of the course. The student does not translate from English to French as he learns. Rather, he relates the language to the situation.

Instruction is not limited to texts, films and recordings, however. One of the strengths of the class in the professors' personal instruction during which time he will pick out new words and introduce them into questions regarding other situations with which the students are familiar.

The exam is an oral one and students' confidence in their abilities is so strong by exam time, there seems to be no fear of failing.

While classes take up only four hours of the day, the whole atmosphere of Collège Mathieu is so French oriented that the entire 24 hours is really a learning situation.

One reason is that Father Piché, the instructors and the monitors join in all the meal time conversation, as well as participating in all the social activities. Les Petite Soeurs de la St. Famille co-operate completely by conversing only in French while they are serving meals or busying themselves with household duties.

It is the monitors, however, that prove to be the coagulant in the learning process. These are Univer-

sity students or graduates of French background, from the town of Gravelbourg, who act as teachers' aides in organizing and assisting with social events. They do much more than this, however, turning up the French word for « toothbrush » in the dorms or « mashed potatoes » in the dining hall.

Four of these monitors assisted at the first summer session and two at the second session. Students of the second session couldn't praise highly enough the help and good company of Lilianne Verville, a vivacious, dark-eyed Gravelbourg girl, who graduated from Regina campus with her B.A. this spring and amiable Eugene Jacques, B.A., B.Ed., a Gravelbourg teacher who gave up seven weeks of his summer holidays to assist English speaking students to « think in French ».

While most of the students are teachers, a few are just starting University. One male student was with the Department of Indian Affairs and another was a commerce graduate. All but one student were from Saskatchewan but the out-of-province student is a teaching sister from Rhode Island, New York, who is related to the program co-ordinator, Father Piché.

However, the course is gaining nation-wide recognition. Father Paris reports an inquiry recently from the Civil Service Commission in Ottawa who showed interest in sending employees to future courses.

While Father Piché doesn't feel the courses offered at Collège Mathieu are going to influence the teaching of the French language in any major way, he does feel a beginning has been made.

« When the English speaking students first arrive, they are hesitant and afraid to speak French », he reports. « By the end of the first week most of them open up and attempt to really talk French. About half way through the first course they can converse without fear of mistakes, and by the end of the

second course, they become confident of their ability to converse fluently in the French language. If a teacher, which most are, the student will return to the classroom to instruct her students with the assurance that she can converse easily in French and therefore instruct them more effectively ».

According to Father Gélinas, the knowledge of oral French is the most valuable asset a teacher of French can have. Father Gélinas also claims that « six weeks of total immersion in French, using the new oral methods in more valuable than 12 years of French as it has been taught in our schools. French as it has been taught up to now was apparently designed for one purpose—to make the student hate it ».

Although Father Piché is delighted that oral French is being introduced into Saskatchewan schools at the grade seven and eight level, he feels even this is too late to start oral French.

« Grade seven and eight is far too late », he holds « When a child is in grade three or four, he can pick up a new language much more quickly. The kindergarten level is even better ».

Since Collège Mathieu is a bi-lingual private boys' school run by the Oblate Fathers, the principal, Father Piché holds very strong views on the teaching of French.

« The most important quality a teacher of French can have is the oral approach to the language. They must be able to hear the language and to speak it fluently and correctly. Next they must learn to read and write it and finally to translate it ».

The ultimate, of course, is not just to hear, speak, read, write, and translate in French. It is to dream in French.

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